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ABSTRACT

This handbook, designed as an introduction to Vietnamese society and culture, presents a highly simplified picture of Vietnamese life covering the following areas: (1) Vietnamese geography; (2) historical facts about the Vietnamese; (3) some aspects of Vietnamese culture, including (a) the philosophical background of the Vietnamese mentality (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity), (b) language, (c) customs and habits (names, clothing, eating and drinking, recreation); and (4) education in South Vietnam, including (a) the educational system, (b) teaching, (c) the Vietnamese student, and (d) the refugee student. (CLK)

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3

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CONTENTS

MAP OF VIETNAM iv

I INTRODUCTION 1

II VIETNAM'S GEOGRAPHY 1

III HISTORICAL FACTS ABOUT THE VIETNAMESE 2

IV SOME ASPECTS OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE 3

A The Philosophical Background of the Vietnamese Mentality 3

1 Confucianism 4
2 Taoism 5
3 Buddhism 5
4 Christianity 6

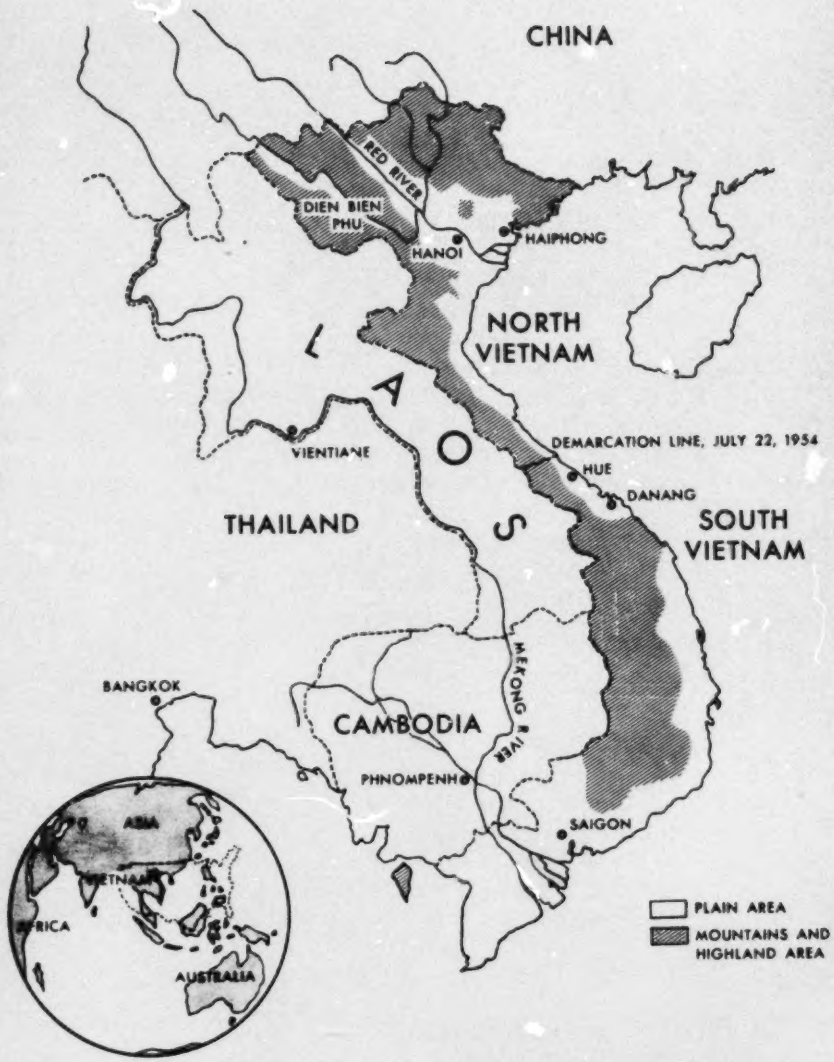
B Language 7

C Customs and Habits 8

1 General Feature 8
2 Vietnamese Names 8
3 Clothing 9
4 Eating and Drinking 9
5 Recreation 10

V EDUCATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM 11

A Educational System 11
B Teaching 12
C The Vietnamese Student 12
D The Refugee Student 13


CHINA
RED RIVER
DIEN BIEN PHU
HANOI
HAIPHONG
NORTH VIETNAM
LAOS
VIENTIANE
DEMARCATION LINE, JULY 22, 1954
HUE
DANANG
THAILAND
SOUTH VIETNAM
BANGKOK
CAMBODIA
MEKONG RIVER
PHNOMPENH
SAIGON
ASIA
VIETNAM
AFRICA
AUSTRALIA
PLAIN AREA
MOUNTAINS AND HIGHLAND AREA

6

I

INTRODUCTION

Many immigrants from all corners of the world came to the United States of America for better opportunities. Most recently, about 150,000 Vietnamese fled their country to escape the Communists and were welcomed to the United States.

We enjoy having them. We share with them the riches, freedom and security of our nation. We are also helping them adapt themselves to our society and build new lives. However, we can be more helpful if we learn to understand their ways and the kinds of mutual adjustments that need to be made by both Americans and Vietnamese.

II

VIETNAM'S GEOGRAPHY

Vietnam is a tropical country in southeast Asia with an area of 130,000 square miles. It is about four per cent as large as the United States, not including Alaska and Hawaii, or about the size of California. Its population is about 45 million.

There are only two seasons in South Vietnam, the monsoon (rainy) and the sunny. The climate is hot and temperatures vary very little. Most Vietnamese people have never seen snow. Upon arriving in the United States they were very upset by the changeability of weather and the big difference between the warmest and coldest temperatures.

Vietnam is mountainous. The two most important of its many rivers are the Red River in North Vietnam and the Mekong River in South Vietnam. These two built two large deltas, which are the most populated and productive areas of Vietnam. The two deltas are connected by an unproductive, narrow coastal plain.

Vietnam is an agricultural country with little industry. Rice is the most important crop, but the land also yields all kinds of vegetables and fruits. Fishing is an important industry, for the Vietnamese eat a lot of fish.

From mid-1954 to April 1975, Vietnam was divided, the Republic of Vietnam in the south and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north. The two Vietnams were about equal in area and population.

III

HISTORICAL FACTS ABOUT THE VIETNAMESE

The Vietnamese, very proud of a history going back thousands of years, originally settled the Red River delta in the fourth century B.C. Since that time they have had to fight off Chinese and Mongolian invaders from the north many times while trying to expand their territory southwards. They reached their southernmost limit and began to advance westward into Cambodia and Laos during the first half of the 19th century.

Then the French came, establishing their sovereignty over Vietnam in 1884. The Vietnamese attempted to overthrow the French domination and

finally, at the end of the Second World War, an independence movement of several political factions--called Viet-Minh--rose up against the French and the Japanese and proclaimed the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The French would not accept this and sustained a long, bitter fight to recover their Indochinese colonies.

While coping with the French, communists within the independence movement worked to eliminate their noncommunist partners in order to establish their own totalitarian regime. Thus was kindled the long-lasting feud between the communist and nationalist Vietnamese. The war with France ended in the middle of 1954 after the fall of the French fortress in Dien Bien Phu.

The Geneva Treaty divided Vietnam into two parts, north and south of the 17th parallel. North Vietnam was controlled by communists, South Vietnam by nationalists. The communists, not satisfied with their victory, sought to conquer the south, realizing their goal when South Vietnam collapsed on April 30, 1975.

IV

SOME ASPECTS OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE

A THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF THE VIETNAMESE MENTALITY

Vietnam is an old civilization dating to thousands of years before Christ. Its most distinctive cultural feature is the strong Chinese influence, especially the teachings of Confucius and Lao-

Tzu. Buddhism also came to Vietnam mainly through China. Later, with the coming of westerners, Christianity became another factor in Vietnamese mentality and culture.

1. CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism played an important role in Vietnamese culture and was continually used by the emperors as an official politico-philosophical doctrine. In ancient times, the emperors and their mandarins carefully studied Confucius' teachings and incorporated them into the organization of Vietnamese society.

The Confucian view of the social order was that the emperor had absolute power and was responsible only to heaven. Three moral principles were uppermost in this society: loyalty of a citizen to the emperor, loyalty of a son to his father, loyalty of a wife to her husband. That society was divided into four classes: (1) the intelligentsia, (2) the peasants, (3) the craftsmen and (4) the merchants. The outcasts of society were performers: singers, actors and actresses. Thus, the Vietnamese have had a long tradition of admiration for learning and contempt for manual skills.

A man of the intelligentsia studied Confucius' teachings to become an honorable person with the qualities of loyalty, gratitude, courtesy, erudition and honor. He had the greatest respect for his emperor, his teacher and his father, in that order. Thus, a traditional Vietnamese youth would be very polite to his teacher, while some not-so-traditional young people today might not be.

After having sought personal development, the man of the intelligentsia had the duty to direct the moral growth, education and activities of his family. The order of importance in a family was based on age and relationship. If he were successful and talented this man was expected to help the emperor govern his country and maintain peace for his people and the world. Confucianism has had a dominant influence on the conduct and morality of the Vietnamese.

2. TAOISM

Another Chinese philosophy which has had much impact on Vietnamese culture is Taoism, founded by Lao-Tzu. Lao-Tzu emphasized charity, simplicity, patience, contentment, and harmony, harmony among humans and harmony between humans and nature. Men and women should seek harmony instead of confrontation. Consequently, Taoism decries regulations and organizations; it is naturalistic in character. It may be due to Taoism that the Vietnamese love nature and hate mechanism and discipline. Taoism has had much influence on the literature and nature of the Vietnamese.

3. BUDDHISM

Buddhism, no less important than Confucianism, is not only a philosophy but a religion. It, too, was introduced into Vietnam mainly by the Chinese. Buddha, the "Enlightened One", taught that life was an ocean of pain and that people are born to suffer and will be reincarnated to suffer again if they do not achieve their salvation during their

lifetimes. The only way to salvation, Buddha pointed out, is to eliminate one's desire. A person should crave neither pleasure nor possessions. Building an indifference to everything serves as a curb to desire. Buddhism, once the national religion of Vietnam, is still dominant, with an estimated 80 per cent of the population being Buddhists. Buddhism has had a tremendous impact on the spiritual life of the Vietnamese, who at times take very pessimistic views of life and the universe.

4. CHRISTIANITY

Roman Catholicism was only recently introduced into Vietnam. Although it has only two million followers, the Catholic Church is the best organized of the religions and exercises powerful authority on the way of life of its followers in South Vietnam. The Catholic Church in Vietnam differs from Catholic Churches in western countries, for it is still very conservative. A Vietnamese of the Catholic faith obeys the clergy and church regulations completely.

The above information on the religions of the Vietnamese reveals the background of their mentality. Still, it is hard to describe a typical Vietnamese. Briefly, they have a very strong sense of family, the family encompassing parents, grandparents, cousins, uncles, aunts, etc. They are patriotic and very proud of their country, but they also admire westerners and their civilization. A well-educated Vietnamese man is very polite, especially to older people, but if irritated can be violent. He will become an enemy if treated with arrogance or contempt, but extends his friendship when he encounters friendship or help.

B LANGUAGE

Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language different from Chinese. However, in former times the official transcript used was Chinese. When European Catholic priests went to Vietnam, they Latinized the Vietnamese script. This gradually became the national official writing.

A sample of modern Vietnamese: "Nay cong dan oi!dung len dap loi song nui. . ." ("O citizens! Rise up and respond to the call of the rivers and the mountains. . .") This is the first line of the South Vietnamese anthem.

Vietnamese has no strict grammar rules. Nouns do not vary according to number. Verbs are not inflected and a change of tense is shown by the addition of a single word that precedes the verb (future = se, past = da). When the verb tense is clear within the context of the sentence or utterance, there is no need to add the word. This is why the Vietnamese have so much difficulty in understanding tenses and plural forms in the English language.

Pronunciation of English presents another problem to most Vietnamese learners. They are confused when pronouncing /s/, /sh/, /ch/, and /t/. It is also difficult for them to know when to pronounce /i/, or /e/, or /ee/.

It is a source of amazement to the Vietnamese to discover that they have to consult a dictionary for the pronunciation of many new words. In French and Vietnamese one can pronounce all words according to established rules of pronunciation, even if one does not understand their meanings.

C CUSTOMS AND HABITS

1. GENERAL FEATURE

Upper class Vietnamese are, in many aspects, more westernized than many other Asians. They try to imitate the French life style, manners and habits. Men are more westernized than women. The life style of a modern upper class Vietnamese male is not very different from that of a Frenchman. Women, more traditional than men, very often wear the traditional "ao dai" (long dress); they rarely smoke, rarely shake hands, rarely drink.

Family ties are very strong. To most Vietnamese the family has an extended meaning. That is, the family consists of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews, etc.

2. VIETNAMESE NAMES

Most Vietnamese have three-word names, but some have two-word names. All names are monosyllabic. Given names have a meaning: e.g., Hoc = learner, scholar; Xuan = springtime; Loan = female bird.

The Vietnamese place the family name first, then the middle name, finally the given name.

> Example: Nguyen Van Nho or Nguyen Ba
> Nguyen - family name; Van - middle name;
> Nho and Ba - given names

However, after coming to the United States, many Vietnamese now reverse the order of their names. For example, Nguyen Van Nho may now write his name the American way, Nho Van Nguyen; Nguyen Ba is now Ba Nguyen.

The Vietnamese are always addressed by their given names, never by their family names. If used formally, given names should be preceded by Mr. or Mrs. or Miss. (In Vietnamese, Ong means Mr., Ba means Mrs. and Co means Miss). Therefore Nguyen Van Nho is Mr. Nho.

A married woman may be called by her husband's given name or by her given maiden name. For example, if her maiden name was Le Thi Hoa and she is married to Nguyen Van Nho, she may be addressed as Mrs. Nho or Mrs. Hoa.

3. CLOTHING

Most people in Vietnamese cities wear western clothes. The rich keep a very close eye on Parisian fashions and imitate them. Peasants usually wear traditional clothes and still live very much in the same way as in olden times.

4. EATING AND DRINKING

Eating is perhaps the least westernized aspect of Vietnamese daily life. The Vietnamese eat three meals a day and as many snacks as possible. Rice is the main staple. An average person usually eats three bowls of rice, along with other foods such as meat, fish, chicken or vegetables at lunch or dinner. For breakfast, a variety of foods is consumed, but a bowl of soup or bread is the usual fare.

Fish sauce is the most popular condiment. Some people claim that a Vietnamese could not live without rice and fish sauce. Soy sauce is another popular seasoning, and Vietnamese foods are spicy. People use a lot of black pepper, onion, hot peppers and garlic.

The Vietnamese have countless kinds of soup, usually eating at least one bowl at the end of every lunch or dinner. They also eat a lot of fish and vegetables. They prefer fresh foods, dislike canned foods.

The Vietnamese do not care much for formality at meals. The important thing for them and their guests is to enjoy their food in comfort. The more guests eat, the more pleased the host is.

The Vietnamese prefer Vietnamese foods but also like French and Chinese foods. They need time to become accustomed to American foods, but many already like roast beef and steaks. Spaghetti and pizza are also enjoyed, but hamburgers and hot dogs hold no appeal. Vietnamese usually use chopsticks, but can also handle forks, knives and spoons.

While most women do not drink alcoholic beverages, many men are great beer drinkers. They also often drink French and American liquors. The soft drinks in Vietnam are similar to American ones. Most people drink tea after meals but also enjoy coffee. Vietnamese coffee is even stronger than Brazilian coffee. Many Vietnamese men enjoy smoking, and all brands of American cigarettes are available in Vietnam.

5. RECREATION

Though very fond of recreation, Vietnamese are not great sports players because of the lack of security in the countryside and the lack of facilities in the cities. Few Vietnamese adults play sports. Young people are more sports-minded and play soccer, volleyball, basketball, badminton, tennis, etc. The Vietnamese know little about such American sports as football, baseball and hockey.

Movies have become the most popular entertainment and have had a tremendous influence especially on young people, who are fervent movie goers and are less traditional than the previous generations. Through movies people seek to learn western manners and habits. American movies, the most popular, often portray a typical American as heroic, violent, hard-drinking. Television is also popular, but programs and performances are considered poor. Consequently, television has not replaced movies in popularity.

V

EDUCATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

A EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Vietnamese education is a highly centralized, national system. Both public and private schools are officially operated and supervised by the Ministry of National Education.

While most elementary schools are public, many high schools and universities are privately owned. There are about 5,000 elementary schools, only about 600 high schools, half of which are public schools. Elementary schools cover grades one through five, high schools six through 12.

Institutions of higher learning expanded very quickly in the '60s and '70s. In the final days of South Vietnam one could count over a dozen universities and colleges.

B TEACHING

Traditionally the teacher is highly respected, the students generally always very polite and obedient. Because of the shortage of buildings, teachers have had to handle large classes, with 50 students in the average public school class. More classes are now coeducational than before.

The principal method of teaching in Vietnam is lecturing. The teacher explains a text on a blackboard while students listen and take notes. The students may ask questions but seldom participate actively in class recitations. The lack of experimental facilities results in tediousness of teaching and learning. Students have had to study too much theory and have had little opportunity for experimentation.

In recent years, as a result of American aid, Vietnamese education has become more and more modernized.

C THE VIETNAMESE STUDENT

The Vietnamese have long admired learning. Parents always try to send their children to school.

In former times only literature and philosophy were taught, but today mathematics and the sciences are emphasized.

Studying in Vietnam is not as easy as in the United States. Although all work hard, only the better students meet with success. Every pupil at the end of his/her elementary education has to pass a difficult entrance examination to get into a public high school, where no tuition is charged.

For the first four years of high school, students all over the country have to follow the same curriculum. For the last three years of high school students can elect specialized courses, choosing mathematics, the sciences, literature or vocational education. The students have to work hard to get good scores so that they can continue to the next grade.

At the end of the seventh year of high school, all students have to take an examination for the diploma of secondary education. It is a difficult examination and only about 50 per cent of the candidates pass and enter universities. Those who fail continue in high school and take the next year's examination; if they fail again, they still continue. Many students never obtain the high school diploma and eventually drop out of school. Even high school students who obtain the secondary school diploma face difficulties getting into good colleges, where the entrance examinations are extremely difficult.

Learning is a very serious matter to most Vietnamese students, who devote much of their time to their studies. They work hard to get degrees so that they can obtain good positions in the job market instead of taking manual jobs that they scorn.

D THE REFUGEE STUDENT

Most Vietnamese students now in the United States are refugees, having left behind in their beloved country the most precious things in their lives, like ancestral burial places and their way of life. The American way of life is quite different from the Vietnamese way, and cultural shock increases their nostalgia. However, American teachers will

probably have little trouble dealing with refugee students, who are used to being obedient and polite. This courtesy, though, often prevents them from asking questions and encourages them to say that they understand when they do not.

A considerable problem for Vietnamese students is language, but teachers of Vietnamese students will find them highly motivated to learn English. English is necessary in their day-to-day living and enables them to conform to their new surroundings. That the Vietnamese students are surrounded--in the classroom, on the street, over the radio and on television--by the language they are learning will facilitate and accelerate their progress.